

SONTAG
OF SUNDOWN



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BY
W. C. TUTTLE



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I

LOV-V-V-VE me, love, a lit-t-tle long-g-ger, 'Till yore wings git a lit-t-tle strong-g-ger."

"Sad" Sontag's lean face quivered with the emotion of his song, as he leaned back against the bar in the Galena saloon, head thrown back and eyes shut. The silver concho which decorated his chin-strap clinked softly as he dropped his head and surveyed the audience.

"And that," observed Sad, "is some singin', if anybody asks yuh."

The big, slouched cowboy with unkempt blond hair and a pair of round, blue eyes, who was facing the bar beside Sad, looked reprov-ingly at him.

"Yuh hadn't ought to sing," he said slowly. "Lotsa things yuh can do better'n sing."

"But them things ain't melodious, Swede.

At times I hanker for the sweet melody of m' own voice, and I has to raise m' vocal cords in song.

“ ‘Go bring me a cu-u-up of co-hold water-r-r To cool m' parched lips,’ the cow-how-bo-oy said;

Before I tur-turned, the spirit had left him And go-hone to its Giver—the cowbo-o-oy was dead.”

“Thasall right,” nodded Swede Harrigan seriously. “Any puncher must be danged near dead when he asks for a drink of water.”

Clell Wheeler, the TJ boss, looked up from his place at a poker table, as he threw aside his cards. His saturnine face expressed extreme disgust, as he turned from his survey of the singer and spoke directly to Jack Rayl, owner of the Galena.

“Didja hire that mockin’ bird, or are yuh sellin’ singin’-whisky now?”

Rayl turned slowly and looked at Sad, but said nothing. Sad yawned and rubbed his chin. He turned to Swede.

"Didja ever hear all that song, with the chorus after each and every verse? She's a humdinger, Swede."

The bartender, who had been polishing the bar behind Sad, stepped away and walked to the far end, where he busied himself. This took him completely out of line with the men at the bar and those at the table.

"The gent at the grouch-table asked a question," continued Sad, "and I don't want to warble until it's all settled. Won't somebody tell him what he wants to know?"

The Galena's noises hushed quickly, and all eyes turned to the men at the bar. Clell Wheeler was a gunman, with an explosive temperament, and it appeared that this lanky, song-loving cowpuncher was storing up a lot of trouble for himself. But the lanky one did not seem greatly concerned.

His faded calico shirt hiked up around his ears from his position at the bar, as he leaned back on his elbows. His chaps were worn and scarred from much usage, and his high-heeled boots were only high-heeled on the outer edges. The cartridge belt, which sagged low on his right hip, was extra wide, and

fitted from much wearing, as was the scarred holster, which held a heavy, black-handled Colt pistol.

Swede Harrigan rolled a cigarette, while his blue eyes watched the men at the poker table. His mother had been of Norse parentage, and from her side of the family he had inherited his blond hair, but his father had died with a Gaelic oath on his lips.

"Ain't nobody goin' t' answer the gent?" complained Sad. "I hate to talk about m'self, or I'd step right in and tell him about it."

Clell Wheeler got slowly up from his chair, shoved his chips across the table, accepted some bills from Jack Rayl and walked straight out of the door.

"I don't blame him," observed Sad seriously. "It's a awful thing to have folks refuse to answer a question."

A pudgy little man, wearing an extra large sombrero and an extra small vest, which could by no manner of means button across his vast expanse of bosom, got up from further back in the room and came slowly up to the bar. He looked at Swede and Sad, or rather he squinted at them.

"This li'l pig went to market. This li'l pig stayed home," muttered Sad absently.

"Whatsat?" queried the fat one.

"Countin' m' toes," said Sad, grinning widely.

"Thasso? Strangers here, ain'tcha?"

"Yuh might designate us as such, pardner, bein' as we just rode in a few minutes ago."

"Yeah? Well," the fat one looked around the room, as though seeking the moral support of the Galena's patrons, "I wanted to tell yuh that Sundown ain't no place to start trouble."

"Folks timid?"

This was too deep for the fat one, but he considered it for a moment.

"Nobody can git rowdyish while I'm sheriff."

Sad jerked forward and made a minute inspection of the fat sheriff, whose face assumed a purplish color at the indignity. Sad looked at Swede, his brows drawn together in a puzzled frown, as though questioning Swede as to what he had heard.

"Me and you heard alike," nodded Swede. "'F he didn't tell me himself I'd never believe it."

Sad looked back at the sheriff.

"I've heard tell a lot about Sundown, but I'm danged if I ever heard that they selected their sheriffs by weight. Thass a new one, Swede."

"Aw, shucks!" blurted out Swede. "You've hurt his feelin's. C'm on back here, Slim, and have a li'l drink."

But Jasper J. Kroll, known as "Jap," waddled indignantly out of the front door, yanked his hat down tighter on his round cranium and headed for his office.

"The folks what elected him was poor shots," declared Sad, "and wasn't taking no chances on havin' a thin target t' shoot at."

"Nobody'd ever have t' shoot at a fat man like him," declared Swede. "He won't even drink. Let's go outside before we drive all the customers out, Sad."

Outside, the afternoon sun beat down upon the dusty main thoroughfare of Sundown City, which showed little activity. Cow ponies nodded at the hitch-racks, and here and there were tied ancient buckboard teams and one or two freight outfits.

Narrow, board sidewalks extended the

length of the short street, sagging and hump-backed from weather and age, while the false-fronted business houses, devoid of paint, seemed to brace themselves against this sidewalk, as though weary of the eternal grind of the seasons.

Three cowboys were coming up the street, trying to walk abreast on the sidewalk. Too much liquor had they imbibed and the crush was tremendous; with the result that one of them fell off the edge of a high-spot and sprawled into a hitching-post. The other two, choking with mirth, passed on into the Galena, while the unfortunate one sat down, with his back against the post and tried to roll a cigarette.

"Betcha forty dollars I know that high-diver," said Sad. "Looky them there feet, Swede. If that ain't 'Bunion' Beesemyer, I'll eat m' hat."

The seated cowboy was not a large man, but his feet were very big, and lumpy appearing. He squinted up at Sad, shook his head several times and tore his cigarette paper in two.

"'F that las' drink didn't go to my head,

I'd say that m' eyes beholds Sad Sontag," he grunted.

"Hyah, Bunion," grinned Sad. "Whatcha doin' here in Sundown?"

Bunion meditated deeply for a moment.

"Workin'. 'S a fact. Been here so long that the HC outfit assesses me as pers'nal propity. What you doin' here, 'f I may ask?"

"Just pulled in."

Bunion managed to get to his feet and sat down on the sidewalk with them.

"Bunion, meet Swede," said Sad. They shook hands.

"Me and Bunion used t' work for the same outfit, down to La Mesa," explained Sad.

"Tha's right," nodded Bunion, "we sure did. You got arrested f'r rustlin' Circle-Seven cows, and broke jail. Never did catch yuh, did they, Sad?"

"Nope, not yet. How'd you come to leave there?"

"Well," Bunion squinted away from the smoke of his cigarette, "I felt safe, after they thought you done it, but I didn't have sense enough to quit. Tha's me; no brains at all. Me'n the sheriff swapped lead and then had,

a horse race, in which I bet m' life. I allus was lucky on a showdown."

"Didja ever hear of a feller by the name of 'Hay-wire' Welton around here, Bunion?" asked Sad, showing no great concern over the fact that he had had to break jail, when innocent of wrong-doing.

"Uh-huh—he's dead. Owned the TJ outfit."

"Where's same located?"

"Panamint Canyon." Bunion squinted against the sun and pointed up the street. "Take the first road that forks to the right and yuh can't miss her. You ain't goin' out there to strike fer a job, are yuh?"

"What killed the old man?" Sad ignored the question.

"Smallpox."

"Anybody else get it?"

"Not's I know about. He had four punchers workin' for him at the time. There's the foreman now."

Bunion pointed across the street, where Clell Wheeler had come out of a general store and was untying his horse.

Sad and Swede exchanged glances, and both

laughed. Clell Wheeler heard the laugh and looked across the street, but mounted his horse and rode straight toward the ranch.

"He's a fir'st-class jigger t' let alone," observed Bunion, pointing toward the fast disappearing Wheeler. "Got a reputation as long as a Siwash's idea of the creation of the world. Gun-fightin' canary, they tells me."

"And he's foreman of the TJ outfit, eh?"

"Tha's the truth, y'betcha. He's got good runnin' mates out there, too. Bill Wing, Hen-nery Held, 'Alkali' Hill and 'Rocky' Shorr. Them jiggers shore do uphold their arguments."

"Who owns the TJ?" queried Sad.

"I dunno. Clell Wheeler acts like he does. Le's all go and have a drink, and I'll show yuh how I'm goin' t' curry the son-of-a-gun that shoved me into the street."

"Much obliged, Bunion, but we had our drink," said Sad.

"Yuh did? My, my! Well, if yore limited, see yuh later."

Bunion limped toward the Galena, going cautiously, while Sad led the way to their horses.

"Might as well take a li'l pasear out that way," remarked Sad, as they rode slowly out of town. "Can't no more'n get shot at, Swede."

"That's some li'l fact," nodded Swede. "'F we don't get out of Sundown they'll be shootin' at us; so it's jist as well. Yuh ain't goin' t' strike Wheeler f'r a job, are yuh, Sad?"

"And waste m' breath?"

"Hm-m-m," muttered Swede dubiously. "I don't see where this idea is goin' t' git yuh anywhere, Sad. Old Hay-wire Welton was yore uncle, but that sure don't mean that yuh inherits this here ranch."

"I'm all the relation he had," reminded Sad. "'F he didn't sell the place, I sure as hell am a ranch owner. Sad Sontag, owner of the TJ. Sounds kinda sweet to the ear, don't she, Swede?"

"She's some musical," nodded Swede, squinting ahead under the brim of his low-pulled sombrero, "but me and you are in kinda bad with the powers that be. Mr. Wheeler has got a reputation t' sustain, and there was quite a few folks in that saloon."

"'Member what that preacher in Caliente said?" queried Sad. "He said that nothin' can hurt yuh, when you're in the right."

"Yes, 'n three days later he got killed by lightnin'," stated Swede.

"Didn't practice what he preached, mebbe."



II

THEY plodded along the dusty road until they came to where another road branched off into a little valley. This road had not been traveled to any great extent. Far below, they could see the dull green cottonwoods and willows.

"This main road goes to the TJ, that's a cinch," said Sad musingly, "and lightnin' killed the preacher of Caliente. I reckon we'll drag an eye over this l'il valley. I kinda want to see what I'm goin' t' own."

They swung off the main road and headed down the valley, riding slowly. At times the valley widened to three hundred yards and then closed abruptly to a width barely wide enough for a road beside the dry watercourse. Rosebushes and stunted willows grew in abundance and the ground had been scored by hundreds of cattle.

Suddenly a cow bawled in the willows

ahead of them. It was not the usual low-toned bawling of a cow calling its calf, nor yet the meaningless call which a cow is prone to emit at irregular intervals, for no reason whatever.

The two men reined up and exchanged glances.

"Blood-bawlin'!" declared Sad softly. "That cow sure is on the prod."

"Smells gore," agreed Swede, spurring ahead.

Cautiously they swung off the road and went slowly in the direction of the sound. The dry willows crashed under the quick movement of the animal, and a man's angry voice said, "Git t' hell out of here!"

A rock whizzed past the animal and almost struck Swede, who ducked quickly. The cow looked them over, turned and trotted up the side of the hill, where she watched them closely.

They rode up to an opening in the willow patch and saw a man on his hands and knees beside a dead steer, which he was skinning swiftly. Just beyond him, in a thicket, stood his saddle horse.

The man was on his hands and knees, with his back to the two cowboys, and did not hear them, as they got softly off their horses and moved toward him. He had skinned out the hind-quarters, and now he yanked the hide as flat as possible on the ground and proceeded to cut a square patch out of it. This seemed to please him, as he folded it up and shoved it into the pocket of his chaps before he continued to remove the rest of the hide.

He did not seem particular to make a neat job of the skinning, but ripped and tore it off as quickly as possible. Behind him, the cow bawled again and he turned his head. For a moment after seeing Sad and Swede he did not move; then he did move. His right hand slapped to his six-shooter and he tried to jump across the carcass of the dead steer, but his boot slipped on the stripped hide and he splatted down, only half-way across, and in a very bad position. He was unable to turn and shoot, as he was resting on his belly and both hands.

"Whatcha tryin' to do, protect the carcass?" queried Sad humorously. "Kind of a case of 'cowboy, spare this steer?'"

The steer skinner remained silent and motionless.

"Shove yore gun away from yuh," ordered Sad, and the man obeyed. They walked up close and looked down at him. Swede picked up the discarded gun and shoved it inside the waist-band of his overalls.

"Roped the animal and cut its throat, eh?" queried Sad, as he looked at the lariat, which was still around the steer's neck, and at the "piggin'-string," with which it had been hog-tied.

The man eased back off the carcass and looked up at them. He was of medium size, with a bony countenance, deep-set, black eyes and a week's growth of whiskers. A purple scar bisected his upper lip, showing plainly in spite of the whiskers.

"Did yuh say somethin'?" asked Sad, squatting on his heels and rolling a cigarette.

"Naw!" The man spat viciously and glared at Sad.

"Gimme the piece of hide yuh put in yore pocket," ordered Sad. The man looked vacantly at him for a moment, as though weighing his chances to hang on to that piece of

hide, but decided to give it up. He flipped it beside Sad, who picked it up.

On it were the burned letters, TJ. Sad smoothed it out on his knee and looked at the man.

"Meat thief, eh?"

The man dug his heel savagely into the dirt and glanced at Sad. "Go to hell, will yuh?"

"Man can't do a thing like that and still live," grinned Sad. "Roped, hog-tied and throat cut. That ain't no human way t' kill meat, old-timer. Mebbe the sheriff will like to meetcha."

The man growled deeply, venomously, but said nothing. He got to his feet and wiped his hands on his thighs. Swede had coiled up the lariat and was looking at the heavy metal hondo.

"I reckon the evidence is sufficient," said Sad, "and you'll have a long chance to loaf in a place where nobody can bust in and hurt yuh."

The prisoner had straightened his muffler and, as Sad finished speaking his right hand flashed inside his unbuttoned shirt and came out holding a heavy Colt six-shooter. He was

at a disadvantage, as he was almost between Swede and Sad, and as he half-whirled to try and cover them both, Swede threw the coiled rope into his face, the metal hondo striking him full in the teeth.

He staggered back, throwing up his arm to protect himself, and Sad flung himself forward, looped both arms around the man's thighs and threw him flat on his back, while Swede rushed in and kicked the gun loose from the man's hand. It was over in a moment. Sad felt the man over, looking for more weapons, but he was harmless now.

He sat up, drew a deep breath and spat out two broken teeth, along with profuse profanity. Swede grinned and yanked the skin away from the dead steer. With his knife he cut a slit in the middle of it, picked the hide up and slammed it down on the prisoner's head, twisting it to let the man's head stick out of the slit. It fitted him like a cape, but did not tend to diminish the flow of profanity.

"Go ahead, if yuh feel thataway," grinned Sad, as Swede got the man's horse. "I shore do believe in free speech. Betcha forty dollars you herded mules once upon a time."

Never heard anybody what could beat you swearin', and I've heard a lot of good cussers."

They roped him to his horse, which they led behind them, but he subsided into sullen silence after they started back toward town.

Bunion Beesemyer and his two companions were crossing the street as they rode in, and stood aside, wonderingly. Bunion scratched his head, knocked his hat into the dust and one of the others unconsciously planted a foot into it. But Bunion did not care. He took the other's hat and limped in behind the three horsemen, who were heading for the sheriff's office.

Jasper J. Kroll met them at the door, which he filled to capacity. He scowled at Sad and Swede and his mouth gawped widely, vacantly at sight of the prisoner in the hairy cape. The prisoner said nothing. Bunion sat down on the edge of the sidewalk and laughed drunkenly, as his two companions came slowly up to him.

"Bill Wing's wearin' 'em ra-a-a-aw!" he blurted, slapping himself on the knee. "Ra-a-aw fer Bill!"

The prisoner glared at Bunion, who went

into fresh paroxysms of mirth, while his companions squinted at the prisoner, as though not believing their own eyes.

"Whatsa idea?" growled the sheriff.

Sad handed him the cut out brand and the sheriff handled it gingerly, while Sad told him what had happened and what they had seen.

"He's a meat thief, if yuh asks me," concluded Sad.

Sheriff Kroll laughed. It was not particularly a joyful laugh, but rather skeptical. He squinted at the prisoner, who tried to laugh, but failed.

"How about it, Bill?" asked the sheriff.

"I dunno what's eatin' these two hombres," said Bill hoarsely. "I found a dead steer and I was goin' t' yank the hide off before the coyotes ruined it, and they slipped in and——"

"Cut the band out ourselves, eh?" finished Sad.

"What'd he cut the brand 'out fer?" demanded the sheriff. "Meat thief, hell! 'F you two smart punchers would mind yore own business yuh might find out that Bill Wing works for the TJ. What in hell would he

steal meat fer? 'F he stole meat, would he steal TJ cows?"

"Are you a lawyer?" queried Sad.

"No, I ain't!" snapped Kroll.

"Then be a sheriff in spite of yore fat, and put this man in jail."

"Looky here!" Kroll's little eyes snapped fire. "I've stood about all I can from you."

"Hop 'em, Sad," urged Bunion. "These whippoowills don't sabe a good fight, and you can lick anythin' that pesticates this Sundown range." Bunion turned to his companions and nodded violently. "Betcha he can, too. Son-of-a-buck can shade 'em all with a gun, and I seen him lick seven in the D-Bar bunkhouse one evenin'."

Kroll swallowed painfully. He knew that a bluff was of no value now.

"Yuh ought t' look at this right," he wheedled. "I'm willin' t' arrest anybody, but yuh can't convict a feller of stealin' thataway. I'll tell Wheeler about it and if he wants to arrest Bill Wing, she's all right with me."

"Wheeler's foreman of the TJ?"

"Yessir, he sure is," agreed Kroll.

"Well," said Sad softly, "I reckon I come

ahead of Mr. Wheeler. I'm owner of the TJ."

"You!" blurted Kroll. "Why—why——!"

"Old Hay-wire Welton was m' uncle, and I was the only relative he had."

"Thasso?" Kroll squinted thoughtfully. "You took charge yet?"

"Not yet."

"Hm-m-m. Yuh got t' show me, pardner. Unless I've been danged badly informed, you'll have a sweet time ever takin' charge."

"Say!" growled Bill Wing. "Ain't somebody goin' to take this here skin off me?"

"Keep your shirt on," chuckled Bunion.

"What do yuh mean?" asked Sad. "What's goin' to keep me from takin' charge?"

"The fact that Welton made a will before he died."

"Well, whatcha know about that?" Sad was surprised. "Don't that beat everythin'? Who was his lawyer?"

"Lawyer? Sa-a-ay, old Hay-wire died of smallpox, didn't yuh know that? No lawyer'd go near him."

"Made out the will when he was sick?"

"Kinda looks thataway, don't it?"

"Never thought of that," mused Sad. "Do yuh reckon that will would stand in court?"

Kroll nodded. "Can't see why not."

Sad sighed deeply and shook his head.

"That's about as near as I ever came to ownin' anythin'. Made me feel kinda good fer a while."

"Well, do I git this hide off'n me?" declared Bill Wing explosively.

"Who inherited the TJ?" asked Sad.

"Clell Wheeler," replied Kroll.

"Uncle sure had a taste," observed Swede dryly.

"Well," Sad considered Bill Wing closely, "I reckon we'll put you behind the bars, Willyum."

Bill exploded into profuse profanity and the sheriff began expostulating all over again, while Bunion Beesemyer clapped his hands and cheered drunkenly.

"You put him in jail!" snapped Sad. "If yuh don't, I'll call a meeting of the Sundown cattlemen and we'll find out why yuh didn't. You're too all-fired fat to do anythin' except set in a chair; so yuh better not get the cattle vote against yuh in next election."

"Zasso?" Kroll's face purpled and his vast bosom fairly quivered with indignation, but he put Bill Wing in jail; much to Bill Wing's indignation and much to Bunion Beesemyer's joy.

"Somebody's sure goin' t' suffer fer this!" howled Bill Wing. "You jist wait and see!"

Sad showed the hide and the cut-out brand to Bunion and his two companions, and asked them to remember just what it looked like. Then he gave it to the sheriff to keep as evidence. Kroll growled deeply over the fact that a fresh hide and hot weather do not mix very well, but Sad reminded him of his duty as an officer, which did not tend to improve the sheriff's temper.

Bunion begged Sad and Swede to have a drink on him, but they declined, and went into a restaurant instead, while Bunion and his companions hurried to spread the news of Bill Wing's arrest.

From their table in the little Chinese restaurant Sad and Swede watched the hitch-rack beside the Galena, where a number of horses were tied, and a few minutes later a cowpuncher came from the Galena, mounted

a gray horse and rode away, heading in the general direction of the TJ ranch.

"'S got me pawin' m' head." Swede sipped slowly at a cup of very strong coffee. "'F Bill Wing belongs to the TJ, why does he kill TJ stock? He wasn't goin' to sell that meat, Sad. 'Cause why? He didn't have no way to take care of it, don'tcha see. Now, 'f he'd had a wagon."

"He wasn't goin' t' sell it," agreed Sad. "I don't know what his idea was, but she's a dead open and shut that he wasn't doin' it for fun. I'm plumb afraid that my new ranch has a bad reputation, Swede."

"Your new ranch?"

"Shucks!" grunted Sad. "Now ain't it peculiar that I can't help thinkin' of the TJ as my ranch?"

"Mm-m-hah," agreed Swede indifferently.

Sad paid the bland-faced Chinaman for their meal and walked half way to the door, where the turned.

"Charley, did you know Hay-wire Welton?"

The Chinaman turned from picking up the dishes.

"Yessah, long time know."

"Thasso?" Sad went slowly back to the Chinaman.

"You know him very well, Charley?"

"Plenty good. My name Hong Kee."

"Glad t' meetcha, Hong. My name's Sad and my pardner's name is Swede. I'm Haywire Welton's nephew."

"Nephew?" Ah! You 'lated Misser Welton? Yess?"

Hong Kee's face was expressionless, as he stared out of the window.

"Misser Welton my flend," he stated softly.

"I betcha," agreed Sad warmly. "Know anythin' about Clell Wheeler, Hong?"

Hong turned from looking out of the window and began picking up the dishes. Sad did not repeat the question. Hong picked up the battered tray before he spoke.

"You nephew? Ah! Hong Kee on'y Chinaman in Sundown. You sabe?"

"I reckon I do," admitted Sad.

"Yessah." Hong shouldered his tray and turned toward the kitchen. "Chinaman 'membah two thing and be happy. Keep bow'ls open and keep mouth shut."

"And that's the truest thing I ever heard!" exclaimed Sad, as the doors swung closed behind the fat Chinaman.

"Wheeler's got the Chink buffaloed," opined Swede.

"Yes," admitted Sad, "and if me and you had as much sense as that Chink he'd have us keepin' our mouths shut, too."

They went out on the sidewalk and looked around. The arrest of Bill Wing had not seemed to cause any undue excitement in Sundown City. Just beyond them hung a dilapidated sign, which proclaimed to the world that Seth Buntley was a notary public who handled several lines of life and fire insurance."

"Let's wau-wau with Seth," suggested Sad. "Mebbe we'll find out a lot of things that won't do us any good."

Seth was in his office. He jerked up his head as the door opened, but when he glimpsed the two cowboys he spat keenly in the general direction of a sawdust-filled box, settled down a bit more comfortably on his spine and dug his nose deeper into an old newspaper.

The room was small and badly kept. One rough table was piled with a conglomerate

mass of books, papers, pieces of ore and some faded photographs. On the four walls were fire insurance lithographs, a badly torn map of the state and the front page of a pink weekly. There were two chairs besides the one occupied by the owner of the office.

Mr. Buntley was built like a slat, and just about as colorless as one. His eyes were sad and heavily pouched, like the eyes of a bloodhound, and looked out past a long, thin nose. He wore a collarless, stiff-bosomed shirt, which was gray from much service, and attached to the sleeves of this shirt were a pair of celluloid cuffs, which rattled hollowly when he moved his bony wrists. A pair of wrinkled, faded, black-and-white checked pants and a pair of gaiter shoes, in which the elastic had long ago curled up and quit functioning, completed his attire.

"How's yore business?" asked Sad.

Seth looked keenly at Sad and made another perfect shot at the sawdust.

"Awright." Seth licked his lips and shifted a trifle.

"I was thinkin' about insurance," said Sad. Seth's vertebrae fairly clicked as he sat up.

"Thàssò? Life 'r fire?"

Sad grinned and pointed at the lithographs. "Made me think of it, them pictures."

Seth shifted his chew and slid back in his chair.

Sad grinned and sat down. He kicked some of the accumulation aside and put his feet on the table.

"Know Bill Wing?"

Seth nodded shortly.

"I just put him in jail."

Seth's chew shifted considerably before he said, "Yeah? What for?"

"Stealin' meat."

"From the TJ," added Swede.

Seth blinked nervously and held up one hand.

"Whup! Don't tell me nothin', gents. I'm the J. P. here in Sundown, and Bill will have to appear before me. It ain't accordin' to law to talk the case over with the judge."

"Huh!" grunted Sad. "You're quite a lot around here, ain'tcha?"

"About all there is to be," agreed Seth, after another shot at the box. "I been here a long time."

"Know Hay-wire Welton?"

"Yeap. Knowed him well."

"Know anythin' about the will he left?"

"Yeap. Read it."

"Left everythin' t' Clell Wheeler, eh?"

"Yeap. Ol' Hay-wire was dyin' and he didn't have no relations nowhere; so he up and wrote a will in favor of Clell Wheeler. Had to leave it to somebody."

"Didn't he have no doctor?"

"Nope." Seth took a fresh chew and settled back in his chair. "Doc Gridley went out there. Doc had a office down the street. Nice feller, doc was. He heard there was smallpox at the TJ and his wife said he went out there."

"That same day Clell Wheeler came here and set on his horse out there in the street and talked to me. He said that ol' Hay-wire was awful bad, and asked me to try and get doc to come out and do somethin' for him. Mrs. Gridley told me that doc left for there that mornin'.

"Well, sir, we found poor doc. His horse had run away with him and went into a wash-out. The buggy was all smashed to hell and

doc was too dead to skin. 'The horse had a busted shoulder and we had to shoot it."

Sad squinted over this for a moment.

"Where'd they bury the old man?"

"On the ranch. I sure felt sorry. Lot of us went out there and set on the fence, while them four men planted o' Hay-wire. The preacher done all his oratin' at a hundred yards. Yuh can't be too careful with that disease, y'betcha."

"Pretty good old pelican, wasn't he?"

"Best yuh ever seen." Seth twisted in his chair and pointed in the general direction of the upper end of town. "Didja notice that building up there that used to be a bank? No? Anyway, she's there. George Hudson comes here a little over a year ago and opens that bank. He's got a wife and a son and daughter. George ain't very strong. He works up kinda good business here, but all to once he gets stuck up and them there robbers cleaned him complete. Took every danged cent he owned. •

"It sure busted the bank and busted George Hudson. Then ol' Hay-wire steps in. He gives Hudson that ol' Crow's Nest ranch, which is part of the TJ, to live on, and gets

Kate Hudson a job teachin' the Sundown school. Yessir, ol' Hay-wire sure saved 'em, and I takes off m' hat to him."

"Give 'em a deed to the place?" asked Sad.

"No-o-o, I don't reckon he did, but he sure told everybody about it. He said it was a home for them folks as long as they wanted to stay there.

"Course it ain't so awful much," added Seth. "The old house needed a lot of fixin', but there's a good spring and a piece of ground to raise a garden. Ain't never heard 'em complain; so they must be all right."

"How much was the TJ worth?"

"I dunno." Seth squinted thoughtfully, as though making rapid calculations. "Some- 'eres between seventy-five and a hundred thousand dollars, I'd say."

Sad gasped.

"Ol' Hay-wire had close onto eight thousand head of cow critters and over two hundred head of horses and a whole flock of mules."

Sad drew his feet off the table, and the front legs of his chair thumped heavily on the floor.

"Where c'n I see that will?"

"Copy of it's filed in the county clerk's office, I reckon."

"Much obliged, judge. See yuh later. C'm on, Swede."

They jingled their spurs out of the door, while Seth spat keenly at his sawdust box and wondered what this lanky cowboy had on his mind. Then he realized that he hadn't asked them their names. He unhooked himself from his chair and went to the door, but the two men were out of sight.

Clell Wheeler, Alkali Hill and Rocky Shorr were riding up to the hitch-rack at the Galena, but none of them answered his wave of greeting.

"Comin' in to find out about Bill Wing," opined Seth to himself, as he settled back into his chair. "I wonder why Bill Wing was stealin' meat from the TJ. Hm-m-m! Likely guilty as hell."

Which showed that even a justice of the peace can have an advance opinion.

Sad had no trouble in finding the copy of the will. The clerk was a morose individual, given to asking pointed questions, but he got no satisfaction from the two punchers.

"Didja see the original will?" queried Sad.

"Certainly, I did. Had it fumigated before I'd touch it."

"It wasn't wrote out by a lawyer, was it?"

"Nope. Welton wrote it himself. See anything wrong with it?"

"Sounds fine," grinned Sad. "Don't 'pear to be a chance in the world to bust it."

"Bust it? What do you mean by that?"

"I was Welton's nephew," stated Sad. "'F he hadn't made that danged will, I'd 'a' been owner of the TJ."

"By gosh, that's sure hard luck." The clerk was sincerely sympathetic. "The TJ's worth a lot of money. Ain't a thing you can do though. That will's airtight."

"Shore looks thataway," admitted Sad. "Uncle Hay-wire 'peared to be kinda positive in his penmanship, and he declares himself to be in his right mind. I'm much obliged to yuh, I'm sure."

They went back to the sidewalk, where Sad seemed to cogitate considerably.

"Well," he finally said, "I reckon that just about settles the cat-hop f'r me, Swede. She's all there on record."

"We mosey onward, do we?" queried Swede sadly.

"'F I knew why Bill Wing killed that steer, I'd be willin'," mused Sad, "but I shore hates to pull out and have that on m' mind the rest of m' life. Let's go over to the Galena."

Business was rather at a standstill in the Galena, as Sheriff Kroll and Clell Wheeler were the points of interest, to the utter exclusion of all other amusements.



III

KROLL was purple of face and shaky of tongue, as he tried to explain to Clell Wheeler that the sheriff's office was not to blame for the incarceration of Bill Wing. Wheeler's face was black with wrath over it all and he was unreasonable in his anger.

"What can I do, Clell?" expostulated Kroll, spreading his hands, as though appealing to the world to observe that he was hiding nothing. "Them fellers swore that Bill was stealin' meat. They had the hide of the critter and the brand cut out. They said——"

"What business of theirs was it?" demanded Wheeler. "Since when did them two start runnin' the TJ? I want yuh to turn Bill loose right now!"

"I can't!" wailed the sheriff. "He's gotta stand a hearin', Clell."

Kroll's agonized eyes beheld Sad and Swede, and he drew a breath of relief.

Wheeler turned his head and looked straight into Sad's level eyes.

"'Pears to me," said Sad slowly, "that somebody's tryin' t' coerce the sheriff."

"Thasso?" Wheeler's voice was contemptuous. He turned his body and placed his hands on his hips.

"You tryin' to run my business?"

"Shucks!" Sad half smiled and shook his head. "'F somebody was stealin' my cows, I sure wouldn't get sore if somebody jailed 'em for it."

Swede moved slowly back, until he was facing Alkali Hill and Rocky Shorr. He slowly rolled a cigarette, keeping his hands level with his waist, and his eyes never left the faces of the two men.

"Bill Wing wasn't stealin' no meat." Wheeler's tone was very positive. "What would he do with it?"

"Mebbe," grinned Sad, "yuh ain't feedin' him very well and he wanted a square meal."

"Hell!" grunted Wheeler. "If you're tryin' to be funny——!"

"I ain't," hastily. "There ain't nothin' funny about it. He threw that steer, hog-

tied it and cut its throat. We watched him cut out the brand and put it in his chaps' pocket. Mebbe he collects 'em, like some fellers collect stamps or bird eggs."

"Wait a minute," begged Kroll hastily. "Arguin' ain't goin' to do no good. Sundown's a peaceful city, and, by grab, I'm askin' yuh to go slow, now."

"Who asked you for advice?" queried Wheeler nastily.

"I'm sure peaceful," grinned Sad. "Don't nobody have t' tell me when m' temper starts t' slip, y'betcha."

"Thasso?" Wheeler rocked on the balls of his feet and considered the tall cowboy. "Peaceful, eh? Then why don't yuh keep your long nose out of things that don't concern yuh? You sure horned into somethin' when yuh started monkeyin' with my business."

Sad turned his head slightly toward Swede.

"Ne' mind me," grunted Swede. "I'm close-herdin' the rest of the TJ."

"Now, now, this has gone far enough." This nervously from Mr. Kroll, trying to light a frayed cigar, which seemed to dodge the wavering match.

Clell Wheeler snorted his disgust. He had talked big, but it was not getting him any results. The habitues of the Galena were very much interested, but keeping well out of line. Somebody backed into a table and upset a stack of poker chips, which clattered loudly on the floor.

"He claims t' be a nephew of Hay-wire Welton," said the sheriff, as though he did not believe it himself.

"Does, eh?" grunted Wheeler. "Personally, I think he's a liar!"

As Wheeler spoke his hand snapped to his gun and he tensed forward, a killer in every line of his face. But Sad did not move a muscle. He looked straight into Wheeler's face and began to grin. The grin widened to a laugh; a laugh which brought tears to Sad's eyes, while Wheeler, wonderingly, dropped his hand away from his gun and relaxed.

Therein showed the psychology of Sad Sontag. Wheeler had the advantage, inasmuch as he had declared himself and worked his nervous system to a swift-draw pitch. Sad had not responded to the challenge, and his laugh had caused Wheeler to relax, like

loosening a tightly-drawn fiddle-string; while Sad, whose laugh had only been a facial contortion, moved forward like a flash.

And before Wheeler could lift an arm to defend himself, Sad's left fist thudded into his face, knocking him over a chair and against the wall. Kroll threw his bulk into the path of Sad, trying to prevent him from following up the blow, but Sad kicked his feet loose from the floor, and the Galena shook with a jar of a two hundred and fifty pound impact.

Wheeler was dazed, but not knocked out, and he staggered to his feet, trying to draw his gun, when Sad hurdled the overturned chair and dove into him. Jack Rayl, either trying to assist Wheeler or to stop the fight, grasped Sad by the back of his belt and got a backward, mule-like kick in the knees for his pains.

"Hook 'm cow!" yelled Swede, backing against the bar and shifting his six-shooter from Alkali Hill to Rocky Shorr, who were crooking their elbows from the menace of that gun and trying to keep their eyes on the fight.

Wheeler was no coward, although he did

not care to fight with his hands. Kicking, cursing, he tried to break away from the long arms which encircled him, and the grinning face shoved close to his. He tried to get his gun, but that move let Sad get the hold he was looking for, and Wheeler's right arm swung a foot wide of the holster, useless, except to swing in weak circles, punching at empty air.

"C'm t' me, Sweet Marie!" grunted Sad, as he crashed Wheeler against the wall, and, on the rebound, he swung the other off the floor, braced himself against the wall for a moment and, with a short, quick run, hurled him straight out through the front window.

Wheeler landed flat on his back on the sidewalk in a shower of broken glass. Luckily for him, Sad had pitched him out feet-first, and he had been hurt little by the sharp edges of the broken window.

IV

SAD turned and looked at the crowd. Swede was laughing joyously, but keeping his eyes and gun on Hill and Shorr. Rayl was nursing his skinned knee, while the discomfited sheriff got up from the floor and scowled his disapproval of everything.

"Plumb through the winder!" gasped the bartender. "Why didn't somebody open the door for him?"

Sad stepped over and flung the door open. Wheeler was getting to his feet, slowly, painfully. Dazedly he looked up at the broken window and wiped a smear of blood across his nose. His right eye was swelling rapidly and assuming a mauve tint. He seemed to be a trifle hazy in remembering what had happened. His eyes shifted to Sad and memories seemed to come to him quickly. But Wheeler was not hostile now. He turned and stumbled across the street and almost ran into a horse

and cart, which was being driven by a young lady, who stopped the horse and stared at Wheeler as he passed in front of the equipage and headed for the Bijou general store.

The young lady turned and looked at Sad as though wondering if he were responsible for Wheeler's appearance. She was not pretty, but she was a wholesome, capable-looking girl. The half-broken pony decided that this was the proper time and place to show off, but the girl whirled it back into the road, almost upsetting the cart.

Another rearing plunge and one of the badly worn lines snapped near the bit, leaving the driver helpless, and causing the pony to whirl wildly from the pull of the other line.

Sad was already running as swiftly as he could to the center of the street. He swung to the frightened pony's head, but the animal, whistling, rearing, tried to shake him off. For a moment they were hidden in a cloud of dust, and then the pony went flat on the ground and Sad perched triumphantly on its head.

The girl sprang out of the cart and came to him.

"Gimme that busted line, will yuh?"

grinned Sad. "You ought t' be spanked f'r drivin' a bronc with a line like that."

The girl flushed slightly, but handed him the offending line, which he quickly tied to the bit-ring. The pony struggled to its feet, blew the dust from its nostrils and trembled violently.

"I can handle him now, thank you," said the girl, but Sad held the animal's head until she was back in the seat again.

With a nod of her head she drove on up the street, and Sad walked slowly back to the saloon, where he peered inside.

"Do tell this feller when t' quit!" begged Jack Rayl, indicating Swede, who was still covering the crowd with his six-shooter. Sad laughed aloud.

"'Sall over, Swede," he called. "Back out and I'll watch 'em for yuh."

"Don't nobody need watchin'," stated Kroll. "Do yuh think we're a lot of murderers?"

"Better t' think than t' find out," grinned Sad, as Swede came up to him, looking back. Alkali Hill took a deep breath and began rubbing his arms. It was a long time to hold them in one position.

"I'm buyin' a drink for everybody," stated Rayl, looking inquiringly at Sad and Swede. Sad shook his head slowly.

"We're just as much obliged as though you'd burnt yore shirt, pardner; but we ain't dry just now."

The rest of the crowd accepted the invitation with alacrity. They felt the need of a stimulant. Sad and Swede moved back to the hitch-rack, where they perched on the top-pole and rolled smokes.

"Yuh sure curried Mr. Wheeler a-plenty," observed Swede, squinting across the street. "What did yuh do after yuh went out? I didn't dare t' turn my head."

Sad told him of the near runaway and Swede grunted dolefully.

"Aw, hell! When there's a chanct t' be a hero, I'm allus doin' somethin' else. Did yuh fall vi'lently in love with each other, Sad?"

Sad favored Swede with a withering glance, but it did not squelch Swede.

"'F yuh see her agin, yuh might tell her that I was the li'l jasper that made it possible f'r yuh to become a hero. I was, too. 'F I hadn't been there, with m' trusty pistol, you'd

'a' likely been plugged in the rear. Tell it all to her, cowboy; and let her choose between us."

"She'd show poor taste, if she picked either one of us," grunted Sad.

"Speak for yoreself, Sad; I'm not so danged bad t' look at. I'd sure make some good woman a husband."

Alkali and Rocky came out of the Galena and went across to the Bijou. Neither of them glanced toward the hitch-rack.

"Bill Wing was their pardner," observed Sad, "and I betcha they sabe what his idea was."

"That skinny one's a tough hombre," said Swede, meaning Alkali, who was thin to the point of emaciation.

"He was just itchin' to go after his gun. I made him stand facin' me, y'betcha, 'cause I might miss him 'f he was standin' edgeways. The other one was plumb docile. Betcha somebody'd have t' tell him when t' shoot."

"Don't give no odds," grunted Sad. "Any of that TJ outfit will shoot quick enough to suit me. Mister Wheeler's likely got a reputation f'r bein' fast, but yuh notice he wasn't

willin' t' give me an even break. I laughed the speed all out of him."

"We're safe enough for a while," observed Swede. "They won't start gunnin' us right here in town. Too many folks t' testify. I wonder if that fat sheriff's on the square."

"Shore, he's all right," nodded Sad. "He's just a fat hop-toad, that feller. He's tryin' t' please everybody and get elected again."

"And now what do we do?" queried Swede, squinting at the sun. "Must be after four o'clock."

"Take a li'l ride," said Sad, jumping off the hitch-rack. "'F it hadn't been for that danged Bill Wing I'd pull out of here right now, but all m' life I'd look back and wonder why."

"Ne' mind Bill Wing." Swede grunted his advice as he swung into his saddle. "They'll likely turn him loose anyway."

"That's a cinch," agreed Sad, but added, "'f we don't hand the deadwood onto him pretty quick."

They rode back to where they had surprised Bill Wing at his skinning job. A flock of magpies had already found the kill and were joyously making one big meal. Sad

only gave it a passing glance and headed on down the road.

"Been a cart along here," said Swede seriously, looking down at the ruts. "Mostly all the tracks 'r made by a cart. I also deducts that the right rein on the horse is tied to the bit ring."

Sad remained silent. Swede whistled un-musically between his teeth for a moment, and then, "Yuh gotta give me some credit for your he-ro-icks, Sad. 'F it hadn't been for me——"

"Aw, shut up!" exploded Sad. "What 'r yuh yammerin' about? This girl wasn't no beauty and——"

"But she was sweet and honest," grinned Swede. "I read that once, and the girl turned out t' be a humdinger. 'F you don't want her, pardner, please don't hint nothin' to her about my past life."

"Folks don't need to be told that you don't amount t' nothin'," grinned Sad.

Half a mile below where they had captured Bill Wing the valley opened into what looked to be a wide pocket, in the center of which stood a rambling old ranch-house, shaded by

cottonwoods and poplar trees. Back of the house was a barn and a corral. The whole place was enclosed by a three-strand barb wire fence.

A black-and-tan dog challenged them as they came in through the gate, barking viciously, and a young man came out of the front door, looking curiously at the strangers. He was not over eighteen years of age, sullen of face, but not unhandsome. He spoke harshly to the dog, which trotted back to the porch.

"Howdy," grinned Sad.

The young man nodded shortly, curiously.

"I thought you was some of the TJ outfit," he said.

Just then the girl came to the doorway, and the two cowboys lifted their hats.

"Howdy, ma'am," said Sad. "Didja have any more trouble with the horse?"

"No, thank you," and to the boy, "Gilbert, this is the man who helped me in Sundown."

"Oh!" The sullen look disappeared and he smiled. "I'm much obliged to you, stranger."

"Don't mention it," smiled Sad. "It didn't amount t' nothin'."

"He told me I should be spanked," said the girl, who seemed greatly amused.

The boy laughed, and his laugh seemed to break the situation.

"You shore lied to me, Sad," declared Swede. "You said she wasn't pretty."

"Well," grunted the embarrassed Sad, "well, you ain't got much sense, Swede."

"And you ain't got good eyesight," added Swede.

"Won't you come in?" The girl's eyes were dancing.

"No, ma'am," Sad shook his head. "M' pardner's kinda simple and yuh never can tell what he might say."

"Aw-w-w!" grunted Swede vacantly.

An elderly man came out on the porch and looked at the two riders.

"Howdy," nodded Sad, as he swung off his horse. "I reckon we better introduce ourselves. I'm Sontag, and m' pardner's name is Harrigan."

"Our name is Hudson, Mr. Sontag," this from the girl. "This is my father and brother."

"Pleased t' meetcha," nodded Sad.

"Kate said something about Clell Wheeler having a fight," remarked the boy.

"I did not say he had a fight, Gilbert. I said he had a discolored eye and appeared stunned."

"That looks like a fight to me," grinned the boy, "and I wish I had seen it."

"Son, you must not talk that way," reprimanded his father. "Mr. Wheeler has——"

"Dad's too darned forgiving," explained the boy, as though apologizing. "Clell Wheeler acts and talks as though he owned the earth, and I'd sure like to see somebody curry him good."

Sad smiled at the boy.

"When yo're young yuh hanker f'r fight, but when yuh get as old as I am you'll sure fight shy of 'em, son."

"'S hard on the eyes," agreed Swede. "Me and Sad Sontag runs our bootheels over from side-steppin' trouble."

"I don't believe that," said the boy quickly.

Sad looked curiously at the boy and shook his head.

"That's the second time we've been called liars today."

"And Clell Wheeler was the other one,"

chuckled the boy triumphantly. "That's where he got the bum eye."

Sad grinned at the boy.

"'Pears t' me that Clell Wheeler ain't no family favorite around here."

Kate Hudson looked meaningly at her brother, as though afraid he might talk too much, but Gilbert shut his lips tightly and barely nodded.

"Yuh don't need t' be afraid t' talk t' me," said Sad. "Yuh see, Hay-wire Welton was m' uncle."

"Your uncle?" exclaimed the elder Hudson. "Why, I did not know he had a living relative."

"Mebbe he didn't either," said Sad seriously. "Yuh know, I never seen him in m' life. He was m' mother's brother. I knowed he was livin' here, but I never came t' see him. Relatives never meant a lot t' me."

"It's too bad you did not know him," sighed Hudson. "He was one of God's gentlemen."

"Kinda runs in the family," said Sad seriously. "I'm a whole lot like him. But just the same, I don't see why he handed the whole danged TJ to Clell Wheeler."

V

HUDSON sighed and shook his head.

"It is hard to realize, Mr. Sontag."

"He gave us this place," Kate Hudson spoke softly.

"I know. I heard about it. Didja have a deed or anythin' t' show for it?"

Gilbert Hudson shook his head quickly.

"That's the whole trouble. Clell Wheeler has told us that we have no right——"

"Gilbert!" The father spoke sharply.

"Those are merely family matters, and between Mr. Wheeler and ourselves."

"Well, anyway, he got licked, Dad."

Gilbert seemed to get a world of satisfaction out of this fact.

"I'll tell a man, he did," agreed Swede warmly, and Gilbert grinned with unholy glee.

"What kind of a reputation has Wheeler got here?" asked Sad.

"Pretty darned bad," blurted Gilbert. "He wants to run the whole country."

Sad looked curiously at Gilbert for a moment.

"Son, did you ever have any trouble around here?"

The boy started with surprise and a quick flush came to his cheeks. For a moment he hesitated and then:

"What do you mean?"

"Trouble," said Sad. "Anythin' that folks might talk about."

The boy turned and looked at his father, as though appealing for advice, but the old man did not respond.

"I do not understand that question," faltered Kate. "What—why do you ask that, Mr. Sontag?"

"It was kinda darned personal," agreed Sad, "but it wasn't because I was nosey, ma'am."

Gilbert cleared his throat nervously and dug his heel in the dirt for a moment before he spoke.

"Well, I—I ain't ashamed of it. It was an accident, but lots of folks will not believe it. Jimmy Bowden and I were hunting deer back

in the hills about six months ago. We crippled one and it got down in a canyon in the brush. I—I thought I saw it, and shot.

"Well, I killed a yearling heifer. It was an accident—honest it was."

Sad smiled. There was no question but what Gilbert Hudson was telling the truth.

"Jimmy said we'd leave it there and the coyotes would fix it in a short time so that nobody'd ever know it was shot, but I said we ought to dress it and take the meat over to the Three-Bar ranch. It was a Three-Bar calf.

"Jimmy agreed, and we dressed it, but when we were packing it out of the canyon we ran into Pete Carey, the owner of the Three-Bar, and Max Corwin, one of his cowboys. They laughed at us. I never was so darned mad in my life."

"And they took yuh to jail?" queried Swede.

"You bet they did," warmly, "but I guess that Sheriff Kroll and Judge Buntley believed that we were telling the truth, and they let us go, after giving us an awful roasting."

Sad grinned and slapped the boy on the shoulder.

"I'm much obliged, son."

"Just what good will it do you to know all that?" asked Kate Hudson.

"I hope yuh won't mind if I don't tell yuh, ma'am. It ain't meanin' nothin' agin' this boy, if that helps any."

"Does it concern Clell Wheeler?" asked Gilbert eagerly.

"Well," grinned Sad, turning to his horse, "yuh can't expect me to tell yuh, after refusin' to tell yore sister, can yuh?"

Gilbert laughed and shook his head.

"Won't you stay and have supper with us?" This from Kate.

"That's shore mighty friendly of yuh," smiled Sad, "but yuh don't exactly mean it, ma'am. No, I'm thinkin' that me and Swede 'll mosey back to town. Mebbe we'll see yuh later, all of yuh, and get well enough acquainted t' stay t' supper. Swede eats with his knife, and we've gotta be acquainted kinda good or it makes it embarrassin' f'r me."

"And this," grunted Swede, "is the third time t'day that you've been called a liar."

"Which ought t' prove it good and plenty," grinned Sad, as he waved good-bye and led the way out through the gate. They headed

back toward Sundown, jogging slowly, both deep in their thoughts.

The sun was behind the hills, and the country seemed a land of gold, with blue shadows, velvety in tone. Near the top of the hill-point, just short of where the road sloped down to the locale of the steer-killing, Sad drew rein and looked back.

A quarter of a mile behind them, winding in and out of the rose-bush fringed road, came two mounted men. They were traveling at medium speed and had likely passed the Hudson place shortly after Sad and Swede had left there.

Sad turned and led the way off the road into a dense clump of willows, where a cow-path cut straight through to the bottom of the little valley. The willows screened them effectually from anyone passing.

"Whatsa idea?" demanded Swede.

"Kinda like to know who them two hombres are, Swede. Mebbe they ain't nothin' but a couple of punchers goin' about their business, and mebbe they're some of that TJ bunch, kinda keepin' cases on us."

The riders came straight on and passed

without a side glance. Neither of them was talking and there was no sound except the jingling of bit-chains and the soft thud of the horses' feet in the dust.

"Not guilty," grunted Sad, as he swung into his saddle. "Never seen 'em before."

They went back to the road and started on, riding slowly. The hills were free of gold now, and in its place was the misty softness of twilight. Nighthawks skirled in their volplaning search for food, and a family of magpies came dipping past, heading for the cottonwood clumps.

Suddenly there came the distant whang of a rifle. The cowboys jerked up their mounts and listened. There was a space of a few seconds, followed by two more shots, spaced about three seconds apart.

"C'm on, Swede!" exclaimed Sad.

The two horses broke into a run without much urging, as though they sensed the need of haste as much as their riders. Around the short curves they clattered, with their riders leaning forward, watching sharply.

Suddenly they swept onto the lower ground and into the wider part of the valley. A

riderless horse whirled out of a willow clump, caught the dangling reins under foot and fell heavily on the uneven ground.

Sad dismounted almost on the run and half-sprawled along the upper side of the road, where a wounded man was trying to claw himself to an upright position.

It was one of the cowboys who had passed them but a few moments ago, and he was hard hit. Sad lifted him around and braced his back against a willow clump.

"There's the other one!" grunted Swede, peering down below the road, gun in hand. "They got his horse, too!"

He humped low and ran down to the man, who was lying on his face. Near him was the horse, lying dead, but indications showed that the horse had lived long enough to bolt off the road and into the willows, where its rider had received the last shot.

The man was dead—drilled dead-center. Swede gritted his teeth and scanned the shadowy edge of the valley. Whoever had done this was well concealed or had left before they arrived. Swede crawled back to Sad, who was making an examination of his man.

"The other man's dead," he announced softly.

"So's this one," breathed Sad. "He only lived a minute, Swede."

"What do yuh make of it, Sad?"

"Dontcha know, Swede? When we let them two men pass us we sent 'em straight into what was comin' t' us. Two men, don'tcha see? Two men in a half-light like this!"

"They got it instead of us," gasped Swede. "Yuh think that Wheeler's gang——?"

"Yeah, but how can we prove it? These men can't tell. Likely they never even knowed what hit 'em."

Sad led the way down to the other man and examined him.

"That's a Three-Bar horse," observed Swede. "The one over there, snubbed up in the reins, is a Three-Bar, too."

Sad glanced at the dead horse and up at Swede.

"It was the Three-Bar outfit that the kid had his trouble with."

"Yeah, but the kid didn't have nothin' t' do with this. Will we take these men t' town?"

"Nope. This is a job f'r the sheriff and coroner, and we won't touch a danged thing, except t' take that one horse back with us."

They caught the loose horse and led it back with them. They rode swiftly and openly, because it was too dark now for an ambush. There was no sign of a human being in that vicinity.

"Got their men and beat it," declared Sad. "There wasn't one chance in a million of makin' a mistake, but it's always that one, lone, little chance that ruins some danged well-laid plots."

"Mighty good shootin'," observed Swede seriously. "I ain't scared of many things, Sad; but I sure don't hanker t' be ambushed by a dead shot."

They found Sheriff Kroll in Hong Kee's restaurant, and he scowled at their approach. There were several men in the place, who stopped eating to stare at the two cowboys. Sad stepped in beside Kroll and spoke softly, as he leaned close.

"There's two dead men and a dead Three-Bar horse in the little valley this side of the old Crow's Nest ranch."

"Uh—what?" gulped Kroll. "Two dead men? Who?"

"I dunno," Sad shook his head. "Nobody we know. Both rode Three-Bar horses. We brought one horse back with us."

Kroll got heavily out of his chair and started for the door, and the other men, sensing something wrong, followed them outside. Kroll looked at the horse and turned to Sad.

"That's Pete Carey's horse."

"Carey got a gray mustache and a scar over his right eye?" asked Swede.

"Y'betcha."

"The other was a younger man, smooth faced and kinda fat. Not very tall." described Sad.

"That's Max Corwin!" declared one of the listeners.

Kroll nodded seriously.

"Yuh say they're both dead?"

"Sure are," agreed Sad. "We heard the three shots fired."

"Yuh did?" Kroll showed more interest.

VI

SAD described seeing the two men, and of how he and Swede had moved aside, thinking perhaps it might be some of the TJ outfit.

"And they horned straight into an ambush that was planted f'r us," declared Swede.

"How do yuh make that out?" demanded the sheriff.

"Well, 'f yuh can show us a better reason f'r the killin', we'll take it all back," stated Sad.

Kroll pursed his lips for a moment and touched Sad on the arm.

"Lemme see yuh alone for a minute."

They walked out of earshot and stopped.

"You didn't take that steer hide away did yuh?" queried Kroll.

"Take it away?" echoed Sad. "Whatcha mean?"

"Somebody took it," stated Kroll. "After that mixup in the Galena I got into a li'l poker

game, and when I went to my office the hide was gone."

"The brand cut-out too?"

"The whole works. The back door had one of them cheap locks and they busted it. I reckon we ain't got much evidence against Bill Wing now."

Sad squinted down into Kroll's face and grinned. He was sure that Kroll, barring the fact that he was of little use as an officer, was honest.

"Well, we don't exactly need Bill Wing anyhow," said Sad. "He served his purpose, I reckon."

"Well, I dunno." Kroll scratched his head as though in doubt as to what to do. "I suppose I better get a wagon and a few men to go along. 'F it's Pete Carey and Max Corwin I'll send a man to the Three-Bar to tell 'em. You'll go with us, won't yuh?"

"Y'betcha we will," declared Sad, and they walked back to the group, where Swede was explaining things in detail to interested ears.

The killing of Carey and Corwin was a jolt to the cattlemen of Sundown, who

thronged the town, ready to ride down any clue as to the murderers. Kroll, with the assistance of a new doctor, who acted in the capacity of coroner, held an inquest.

The people were about evenly divided as to the truth of Sad's and Swede's evidence. It looked too improbable. Of course, Sad and Swede made mention of the fact that the murderers had made a mistake, but everyone tried to find out who knew that Carey and Corwin were to ride that road at that time.

It was a hopeless search. Kroll kept his mouth shut. He also felt that the answer lay in the TJ outfit, but there was no evidence. Wheeler and his gang had left Sundown a short time after Sad and Swede had ridden away, but further than that there was no evidence against them.

Wheeler and his men mingled with the crowd and swore swift vengeance on the guilty parties, but kept away from Sad and Swede. There were many who knew of the bad blood between the TJ and these two strange punchers, and watched curiously to see what would develop.

Bill Wing had been released and was drink-

ing heavily. Hill was also absorbing more than the usual amount of raw liquor, but Wheeler and Shorr were cold sober. Shorr was of a phlegmatic type, slow of speech, slow of comprehension, but Sad Sontag feared him more than he did either Hill or Wing, who were of nervous temperament.

All through the day, Sundown seemed to be laboring under a nervous tension. Men drank, gambled and laughed, but there was an undercurrent of seriousness in it all. Men of the range take murder seriously. A killing, where there is an even break, is considered part of the day's work, but a mysterious murder makes men afraid of their neighbors.

It was after dark that Sad and Swede leaned on the bar of the Galena, watching the crowd. A three-piece orchestra rattled a two-step, but the dance space remained empty. There was little laughter at the gambling layouts, and Jack Rayl, standing near Sad, remarked about it.

"Everybody actin' like a thunder storm was comin' up and no shelter in sight."

"'S a glarin' fact," nodded Sad. "Makes a feller kinda itch."

Suddenly there came the unmistakable pop of a pistol shot, as though muffled by closed doors. It had come as sort of a punctuation mark for the finish of the two-step.

Sad, Swede and Rayl went quickly to the door. Across the street there seemed to be a sudden movement in Hong Kee's restaurant. The door was flung open and several men came out. One of them ran straight for the door of the Galena, and Sad noted that it was one of the HC cowboys, who had been with Bunion Beesemyer.

"Chink shot!" he panted, looking back. "Alkali Hill drilled him a minute ago!"

"What was the trouble?" asked Rayl quickly.

"Whisky, I reckon. Alkali was drunk, mean drunk. He smashed up the dishes, him and Bill Wing, and the Chink tried to stop 'em. I reckon he done for the Chink."

Two horses swung away from the hitch-rack and galloped away up the street, and Sad knew that Bill Wing and Alkali Hill were leaving town. He and Swede crossed the street ahead of the crowd from the Galena and went inside.

Hong Kee was lying on his back on the floor, with his head and shoulders partly braced against the wall, while a frightened, half-drunk cowboy was trying to give him a drink from an empty flask.

Sad dropped to one knee beside Hong Kee and lifted him to an easier position. The Chinaman was conscious, but badly hurt. Sad gave him a drink from a half-empty glass of water, and a moment later Kroll and the doctor came in.

The crowd packed the restaurant, climbing on tables and chairs; morbidly curious to see the dying Chinaman. The doctor worked swiftly with his examination, and turned to Kroll.

"He lives back of here, don't he? Help me put him on a bed and keep that crowd back."

Sad and Kroll carried Hong Kee to his little living-room and placed him on the bed. Swede barred the door behind them, in spite of the crowd, which demanded admittance.

The doctor shook his head sadly and shoved his hands deeply into his pockets.

"Not a thing I can do," he muttered, "not a thing."

Hong Kee's eyelids fluttered, but his face remained immobile. He had heard the verdict. His eyes shifted to Sad and he said painfully, "you stay—please. Eve-body else go 'way."

Sad glanced at Kroll and nodded.

"I reckon he's delirious, Sheriff."

"No," the doctor shook his head. "I think he is fully conscious."

"Please go 'way," repeated Hong Kee. "I not live long now. I must talk to this man."

"C'm on," ordered Swede. "I reckon he knows what he wants."

Kroll and the doctor turned away, and with Swede they went out into the crowd, where Swede shut the door and backed against it.

"Whatcha want Hong Kee?" asked Sad softly.

"Ah!" Hong Kee licked his dry lips.

"Feel under mattress fo' li'l box. No; under pillow. You fin'?"

Sad drew out a small, japanned lock-box, which he showed to Hong Kee.

"Inside colla'—me," choked Hong Kee. "You look, fin' li'l key."

Sad fumbled inside Hong Kee's collar and

drew out a tiny key on the end of a very fine silver chain. He fitted the key and opened the box. Inside was a folded paper. He turned to Hong Kee and saw the Chinaman looking at him, as though struggling to speak. Sad leaned forward and lifted the Chinaman's head.

"Yo' read," gasped Hong Kee thickly. "I go too quick now. You—you—smart—boy—read—yo'—see."

Hong Kee had gone to join his ancestors. Sad laid him back on the bed, locked the box and replaced it under Hong Kee's pillow. He did not look at the paper, but put it inside his shirt and went to the door.

"Hong Kee's dead," he announced to the crowd.

Several men crowded past him to view the remains of Sundown's only Oriental. Sad went straight to Kroll.

"He wanted to tell me somethin'," stated Sad, "but he passed out too quick. Mebbe he imagined he knew me. Are yuh goin' after Alkali Hill?"

Kroll shook his head.

"They say that Hong Kee tried to carve

Hill with a knife. Anyway, it would be hard to get a jury to convict him for killin' a Chinaman."

"I don't believe that Hong Kee had a knife; and as far as nationalities goes, Hong Kee was a better citizen than Alkali Hill."

"Mebbe so," agreed Kroll wearily. "Hong Kee was a danged good cook."

"Do yuh know what I think?" queried Sad.

"No, what?"

"I think that 'f I was a voter in Sundown County I'd kick you out of the county and stable a sheep in your office. You think a few crooked voters are worth more to you than the oath yuh swore when yuh took office."

"Don'tcha talk to me that way!" yowled Kroll. "I'll run my office!"

"When yuh goin' t' start?" asked Sad. "Yo're one fine example, Kroll. Keep yore hands still. I could go home and get a gun and come back here before you could pull one."

The crowd laughed, much to the indignation of Mr. Kroll, and Sad appealed directly to them.

"I dunno how you fellers feel about this,

but I'm kinda strong f'r puttin' Alkali Hill where he belongs. He came in here to start trouble with Hong Kee, and he sure as hell murdered him. Hong Kee kept sober and minded his own business; which is more than Hill ever did. Are yuh goin' t' let Hill go free?"

"I don't reckon Hill is goin' to run away," stated one of the crowd. "Anyway, it's a job for the sheriff. Nobody asked a Chinaman to come to Sundown."

"Oh!" said Sad softly. "Do folks have to be asked to come here? Nobody asked me."

"I guess that's a cinch," laughed the man.

"No, I wasn't asked," repeated Sad, "and 'f I knowed the class of coyotes who lived around here I wouldn't 'a' come on a bet."

For a moment the crowd was silent. It was a direct challenge to them all, but no one seemed to want to accept it. Sad was blazing with anger, foolishly reckless. The odds were against him, but every man in the crowd knew that the risk was not worth it. Kroll licked his lips and sidled in beside Sad, facing the crowd.

"I—I'll be damned if I don't think he's

right," faltered Kroll. "He's kinda got the right idea, gents, and I'm backin' his argument."

"After what he said to you?" queried a red-faced cowboy rather sarcastically.

"I—I reckon I had it comin' to me, Shorty. I been listenin' and sayin' yes too much."

"All this fuss over killin' a Chink," grunted another. "Sundown's better off without him."

"It ain't a case of color nor nationality," said Sad slowly. "It's a case of right and wrong. A human life is a human life, whether the skin is black or white, and it's just as much of a murder to kill a Chinaman as it is a white man."

"That's yore idea," sneered the man. "'F yuh loved that Chink so much, why don't yuh go after Hill yoreself?"

"I'm goin'," stated Sad simply, "and I reckon the sheriff's goin' with me."

Kroll shook his head quickly.

"Nope, yo're wrong, pardner. I'm goin' after Hill m'self, and you can go with me. C'm on."

They went outside and headed for their horses. The crowd seemed undecided what

to do, but the majority of them went back to the Galena. The cowboy who had sneeringly suggested that Sad go after Alkali Hill went down the street to his horse, mounted, circled the town and headed for the TJ ranch.

Sad and Swede secured their horses and went to Kroll's office, where he was saddling. He handed them each a rifle and a belt of cartridges.

"Yuh never can tell," admitted Sad, examining his gun, "and these thirty-thirties make gun-talk kinda local at long range."



VII

THEY rode past the Galena, but no one seemed interested enough to watch them leave. The high tension, which had gripped the town all day, had slackened and Sundown was beginning to enjoy itself again. The killing of Hong Kee had given them something definite to talk about.

The three men rode swiftly along the dim, dusty road, heading into a brisk wind and leaving a long, low cloud of dust behind them, like a battle cruiser laying a smoke-screen.

Sad wondered what Hong Kee's document meant. He had had no time as yet to read it; yet he knew it must be important. Hong Kee knew he was dying, and this was his last act; which proved it to be important, except that perhaps Hong Kee was delirious and attached great importance to a minor matter.

"Looks like a fire ahead of us!" called Swede, and the three men drew up their running horses.

Beyond them appeared a rosy glow against the dark sky. It seemed to die down and then glow brighter.

"Betcha the TJ's on fire!" exclaimed Kroll. "It's right in that direction."

"Shore is somethin' goin' up in smoke," agreed Sad. "Shake a leg, and mebbe we can help 'em out."

The three horses broke into a run again, with the riders nursing them to greater speed and watching the glowing sky ahead of them. Around the curving road they pounded, the three horses running like a team, until they neared the forks of the road.

"It ain't the TJ!" yelled Sad. "It's the Crow's Nest ranch."

Without diminishing their speed the three horses swung to the right and headed off down the narrow, curving road at break-neck speed; weaving in and out of the narrow valley and over the high points. Never did that little valley road seem so long, but finally they swung over the last point and raced wildly toward the old ranch-house, which was now a blazing furnace.

Dismounting on the run, Sad raced to where

a huddle of people stood watching the destruction of their home. Kate came to meet him, her face white and tear-streaked. They had all managed to get out of the place, and had saved much of their clothes, but everything else had burned.

Her father seemed dazed, and the mother, a pathetic-looking, little gray-haired lady, wrapped closely in a blanket, cried softly to herself. Only Gilbert seemed perfectly normal, but very quiet. Kroll and Swede joined them and silently watched the destruction.

"How'd it start?" queried Sad.

"We were all asleep," replied Kate. "There was not a lighted lamp nor a fire in the stove."

"It was set on fire!" exclaimed Gilbert bitterly.

"Gil, don't say that," begged Kate. "You are not sure."

"Why would anybody set it on fire?" asked Kroll.

Sad drew Kroll aside and spoke softly.

"Was Clell Wheeler in Sundown at the time Hong Kee was killed?"

"Nope. Him and Bill Wing left about an hour before. I seen 'em ride away."

Sad turned and went back to the group, where Swede was trying to cheer them up, but having little success.

"Folks, there ain't no chance or savin' anythin' from that fire, and you folks have got to go some'ers; so we'll go over to the TJ and borrow a team and wagon t' take yuh to Sundown."

"I'd rather walk!" snapped Gilbert.

"All right," agreed Sad, "you can walk, son; but yore mother and father ain't so spry as you are. C'm on, Kroll."

They mounted, and Kroll led the way past the burning ranch-house and into the willows.

"This is a short-cut," he called, riding into a deeply cut trail, which led up the hillside. "Only about a mile to the TJ this way."

"I wonder 'f the kid was right," said Sad, as they stopped at the rim of the valley and looked back at the burning house.

"I don't think so," replied Kroll. "What in hell would anybody set fire to it for, Sontag?"

"I dunno," grunted Sad.

"Lotsa funny things happen," grunted

Swede. "Why did Bill Wing kill a TJ steer and cut out the brand?"

"Yeah!" snapped Kroll, swinging his horse and heading down the trail.

"Why was Carey and Corwin killed?"

"That," said Sad, "is the easiest question of 'em all, but danged hard t' prove."

Before them loomed the silhouette of the TJ ranch-house and out-buildings. There was not a light showing. Kroll led the way through the gate and up to the long, low porch, which almost circled the house. It was a much better class of ranch-house than the usual run of Western range dwellings.

Kroll jingled his spurs on the steps and knocked on the door with the muzzle of his rifle. Several times he knocked before there was any response. Then came Wheeler's voice, sleepily wanting to know who was out there at this time of night.

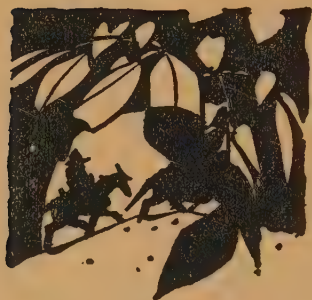
"This is Kroll. The old Crow's Nest ranch-house is on fire."

Wheeler grunted an unintelligible reply and opened the door.

"Hyah, Kroll," he grunted. "Whatcha say about the old ranch?"

"Burned down a while ago and the Hudson family are without a roof. We want to borrow a team and wagon to take 'em to Sundown."

"Burned down? Well, it's funny we never see it. Wait till I get on some clothes."



VIII

IN A few moments Wheeler came out on the porch, drawing on his coat.

"Who's with yuh?" he asked.

"Sontag and his pardner."

"Oh!" Wheeler did not seem a bit pleased.

"Where's Alkali Hill?" asked the sheriff.

"Damned if I know. Whatcha want him for?"

"He killed the Chinaman, Hong Kee, a while ago."

Wheeler seemed genuinely surprised. "Yuh ain't aimin' to arrest him for that, are yuh?"

"Yuh think I ain't?"

Wheeler was silent for a moment, and then said, "Alkali and Shorr stayed in town, I reckon, and I never heard 'em come back. Me and Bill Wing came home early. Bill's in bed, but if yuh want him——"

"Has he killed anybody?" queried Kroll.

"Whatcha mean by that?" demanded Wheeler. "Yor're sure goin' to get yoreself dis-

liked, if yuh don't look out, Kroll. If yuh think that Alkali is here, yuh might search the place. Mebbe's he's in the bunk-house."

"Ne' mind lookin'," said Sad. "He won't be."

"What do you know about it?" demanded Wheeler.

"He went out of town too fast to stop here and stay in sight."

Wheeler remained silent for several moments. He knew that there was no use arguing further.

"Well, I don't know a thing about what Alkali done, and I care less. I'll get the team and we'll bring the Hudson family over here. Reckon I can do that much for 'em." He started toward the barn, but turned.

"Say, Kroll, when are they goin' to bury Carey and Corwin?"

"T'morrow."

Wheeler turned and went toward the barn, while they waited in silence. They could hear Wheeler swearing at a work horse, but none went to help him harness the team.

He drove up to them and Sad moved his horse over closer to the wagon.

"There ain't no use of you goin' over, Wheeler."

"Why not? I'll bring 'em all over here."

"You know very well they won't come."

"Why won't they come?" demanded Wheeler hotly.

"Answer that question yoreself," replied Sad.

Wheeler grunted angrily, but climbed down.

"'F that's the way yuh feel about it——"

"I ain't doin' no feelin'," replied Sad, and then to Kroll, "you drive the team, Sheriff, and I'll lead your bronc."

Wheeler made no comment when Kroll turned his horse over to Sad and took charge of the team. They drove away without saying anything more to him, but they heard him slam the ranch-house door wickedly as he went inside.

About a mile from the TJ, Sad rode in beside the wagon and spoke to Kroll.

"I'll tie yore bronc to the end-gate of the wagon, Kroll."

Kroll stopped his team.

"Whatcha mean?" he asked.

"Me'n Swede ain't goin' t' the Hudson place with yuh," replied Sad. "'F they ask where we went, yuh can tell 'em we're lookin' for Alkali Hill."

"But—" Kroll started to protest.

"Thasall right, pardner," assured Sad. "I'm goin' t' do a li'l peerin' around; sabe? You fix up them folks in Sundown and go to the funeral, just like nothin' happened. I'm bettin' that Hill knows we're after him, and that's goin' t' help a lot."

Kroll rubbed the sole of his boot on the wagon-box and spat resignedly.

"Well, all right. S'pose I've gotta go to that funeral. Everybody in the country'll be there. Them two fellers was right pop'lar. Be a big crowd."

"Probably," nodded Sad. "See yuh later."

"If anybody asks about yuh, what'll I tell 'em?"

"Yuh might tell 'em we had a hunch that Hill had gone toward Canada, and that we're goin' t' watch the border."

"All right," nodded Kroll, and drove away.

"That joke sure missed fire," chuckled Sad.

"Kroll don't know how long the Canadian border is."

They rode back along the rim of the valley, dodging the small canyons and picking their way over a strange country until they reached the short-cut trail, which they had but lately ridden.

"I remember a high spot some'ers," stated Sad. "A spot where there was a lot of jack-pines, I reckon. Mebbe it was closer t' the TJ."

They rode back toward the TJ ranch until they found the spot referred to, where they dismounted and tied their horses in the midst of the jack-pine clump.

"From here we ought t' be able to see the TJ," said Sad. "We'll stay here until daylight, which ain't so danged far away."

"What do yuh expect to see?" queried Swede, rolling a cigarette and handing the makings to Sad.

"I ain't got the slightest idea, Swede."

"What did that Chinaman give yuh?" asked Swede.

Sad took the paper from his pocket and examined it by the light of a match. In fact it

took several matches before they finished reading it.

It was a bill of sale, made out in favor of Hong Kee, making the Chinaman sole owner of the restaurant in Sundown. The document was witnessed by Doctor J. H. Gridley.

"What do yuh make of it, Sad?" asked Swede.

"I'll be danged 'f I know. She ain't nothin' but a bill of sale. Likely old Hay-wire made the Chinaman a present of the place. She's witnessed by the doctor that got killed while he was goin' t' see Hay-wire.

"Sure got me pawin' m' head, Swede! Hong Kee said I was a smart man and would see. See what? Doc Gridley signed it, but he's dead. Shucks!" Sad folded it up and put it in his pocket.

"I dunno what he meant. Mebbe he was hurt kinda in the mind and he imagined things. Still he—he died sayin' for me to read it and understand. I've heard that the Chinks are great on puzzles and mebbe he thought—sh-h-h!"

Came the dull thud of horses walking, and the two men crouched lower, pinching out

their cigarettes. From out of the brushy trail, from the direction of the TJ ranch, came two horsemen. As they topped the hill it was not hard for Swede and Sad to recognize Clell Wheeler and Bill Wing. They were riding in single-file and neither man spoke during the time they were within earshot of the two cowboys. They faded out in the darkness of the trail toward the old Crow's Nest.

"Goin' to foller 'em?" asked Swede eagerly.

"No-o-o, I reckon not. They're just lookin' around."

They lay quietly in the brushy cover, and in about an hour the two men rode back along the trail. It was lighter now, with the false light which comes about an hour before the real dawn. And Wheeler and Wing were conversing now, and a snatch of it was wafted to the ears of the two cowpunchers in the brush.

"Must 'a' been hotter'n hell," this from Wing.

"Sure was," replied Wheeler. "Dry old shack, but it'll cool off in an hour or so."

Bill Wing made a laughing response, but they were over the top of the hill now and

their words became more and more indistinct.

The coming of the sun was a welcome relief to Sad and Swede, for it had been a chilly vigil. From their vantage point they could see the TJ ranch-house, where a streamer of smoke was coming from the stove-pipe.

"Breakfast!" grunted Swede dolefully. "My gosh, I could eat a whole ham!"

"Eatin' makes a feller dull in the mind," grinned Sad.

"Thasso? Gee cripes, I sure am wise and witty then!" grinned Swede. "Yessir, I'm plumb alert and sharp as a razor."

"Two men saddlin' at the corral," declared Sad. "I sure wish we had a field-glass."

They watched the two men mount and ride past the house. At that distance it was impossible to see who the men were, but the horses were a pinto, which Bill Wing had ridden, and the unmistakable, tall black, belonging to Clell.

"C'm on," grunted Sad, heading for his horse. "Looks like them two are headin' f'r Sundown, but yuh never can tell."

Swiftly they rode back along the valley's

firm, where the hills screened them from the road, traveling on an angle which would bring them to the forks of the road ahead of the other men.

Just before reaching the forks, and at a spot where they could see the grade beyond the forks, Sad drew up his horse and led the way behind a screen of brush. In about ten minutes a lone horseman rode around this grade, heading for Sundown, and he was riding Wheeler's black horse.

"Where's Bill Wing?" grunted Swede wonderingly.

Sad shook his head.

"I dunno, Swede. Looks kinda like Wheeler was goin' t' town alone t' find out how things look for Alkali. Wheeler's naturally got to go to that funeral. Let's sneak back and take a look at the burnt ranch-house. Keep under cover as much as yuh can, 'cause Bill Wing's playin' look-out in this game, I reckon."

"Lookin' out for what?"

"Me 'n you 'n everythin', Swede. Just why, I dunno."

They went slowly back along the rim for a

short distance, where Sad discovered a cattle-trail, which led down through a narrow wash-out and into the valley. It was precarious footing for the horses, but they managed to keep right side up and landed on the floor of the valley without mishap.

Under the protection of the north rim, and with the willows and brush as a cover, they were effectually screened from anyone watching the valley from near the forks.

As they neared the scene of the fire a dog began barking frantically.

"Somebody there," declared Swede, but Sad shook his head.

"They must 'a' forgot their dog last night. Mebbe he sees somebody."

They dismounted on the brushy trail, took their rifles and pushed on through the willows that fringed the clearing to where an opening gave them a clear view of the ruins. The dog was just a short distance beyond them, looking in the direction of the cut-off trail to the TJ. Suddenly he began barking again, and into the clearing walked Alkali Hill and Rocky Shorr, going very cautiously and scanning the country closely.

Alkali swore viciously at the dog and threw a rock at it.

"Shut up, yuh fool! Don'tcha know your friends?"

Shorr laughed, and they both went to the pile of ashes and blackened, charred timbers. [Then, for the first time, Sad and Swede noticed that Shorr was carrying a short-handled shovel. He poked it into the mass of ashes and stirred them violently.

"Clell said it would be cold by mornin'," stated Alkali. "This stuff burns danged hot, but it sure don't leave nothin' to hold the fire."

"Lucky thing!" grunted Shorr. "I reckon we better show a little speed, Al. Yuh never can tell who might show up around here to-day."

As he plunged his shovel into the ashes again, the dog started a terrific barking and began jumping stiff-legged toward the spot where Sad and Swede crouched behind the clump of willows. The dog had either seen or smelled them.

"Look out!" snapped Alkali, and whirled toward the fringe of brush fifty yards behind him, where their horses were tied. Shorr

dropped his shovel and rushed toward the nearest clump of trees, drawing his six-shooter as he ran.

Sad sprang into the open, yelling for Hill to stop, but Shorr snapped a shot at him on the run, but the bullet went six feet wide of its mark.

Alkali had almost reached the protection of the brush, when Sad fired. It was a long shot and Alkali was running an erratic course, but he stumbled, floundered sideways and fell into the brush.

Swede fired at the same moment and Shorr dropped his gun. Quickly he whirled and tried to pick it up with his left hand, but Swede's second bullet ripped the ground under his groping hand and he sat down heavily and held up his left hand in a token of surrender.

"Set 'em up in the other alley!" grunted Swede, as he shoved fresh cartridges into his gun.

"Didja kill Alkali?" queried Swede.

Powee-e-e!

A bullet hummed past them and from Alkali's cover came the pop of a six-shooter.

"Nope," grinned Sad, as they dropped flat and let the next bullet fly high over their heads.

"Plumb forgot them Winchesters!" grunted Sad, drawing one of them from under his knee and cocking it. Shorr was nursing his right arm and interestedly watching the effect of Alkali's shooting.

"Hey! Alkali!" yelled Sad. "Do yuh hear me?"

"Go to hell!" yelled Alkali.

"C'm out of there!" yelled Sad. "'F yuh don't we're goin' t' rake that place with thirty-thirties. Do yuh know what that means?"

"See yuh in hell first!" screamed Alkali.

"Brother, you know yore destination," said Sad, and proceeded to empty a magazine of cartridges in the vicinity of Alkali's position.

When Sad stopped to load, Swede took up the burden and searched the brush at intervals of about three feet apart. Still Alkali made no objection, and Sad opined that their target was in a hole. As he shoved his rifle forward to search out more territory, a heavy bullet thudded into the forearm of the gun and almost yanked it from his hands. The report

of the gun came from further toward the hill, and they ran back through the brush, where they saw Alkali trying to mount a frightened horse.

"Watch the other feller, Swede!" yelled Sad. "I'll stop this jasper.

Swede ducked back through the brush just in time to prevent Shorr from making his getaway with the gun in his left hand. Sad was unable to shoot at Alkali because of the whirling mount, and Alkali managed to get aboard, in spite of his wound.

Sad yelled at him to stop, but Alkali flung himself along the side of the horse, trying, as Sad thought, to shield himself from a shot, but in reality he was trying to recover the reins, which he had dropped in his mad scramble to mount the horse.



IX

BUT the frightened horse whirled wildly and bucked straight toward Sad, who was about seventy-five yards away. Alkali realized his predicament and clutched the saddlehorn with one hand while with the other he fired shot after shot at Sad, trusting to luck to clear a path to safety.

But Sad merely shifted aside and fired once at a range of thirty yards, and the horse fairly turned a somersault, throwing Alkali head first into the brush, where he crumpled motionless.

"Betcha he'll stop now!" yelled Swede.

"Yep," replied Sad grimly, "he stopped."

Sad picked Alkali up in his arms and carried him over to where Swede was standing beside Shorr. Alkali was only stunned and his first sign of regaining consciousness was to curse brokenly. He glared at Sad and Swede, cursed them back for several generations, and then refused to talk any further.

He had been shot through the fleshy part of his right leg, below the knee, which had caused him to stumble, but the wound was not dangerous. Shorr's right arm was broken between the elbow and shoulder. When Alkali refused to talk, Shorr also refused.

"What was yuh goin' t' look for in the ruins?" asked Sad, but they would not answer him.

Sad got the lariat rope off Alkali's saddle and used it to tie up both men. Alkali's tongue loosened enough to wag out a few vile epithets, but he was dumb on anything pertaining to information.

"Ain't we goin' to take 'em to town?" asked Swede.

Sad looked at the prisoners and moved in closer to Alkali.

"Hill, why did yuh kill Hong Kee?"

"He came at me with a knife; that's why!" snapped Hill.

"You're a liar!" retorted Sad. "He didn't have any knife in his hand and there wasn't any knife near him."

"Don't talk to 'em," advised Shorr. "Yuh don't have to, Al."

Sad squatted down on his heels and took out the bill of sale, while the two prisoners watched him closely. Sad squinted away from the smoke of his cigarette and frowned deeply, as he read it over again. Suddenly he blew the cigarette out of his mouth and got slowly, wonderingly to his feet, still staring at the paper.

"So that's what he meant!" he grunted.

As he turned quickly to Swede, a bullet kicked up the dirt under his feet, and from far back on the hill came the thin, whip-like crack of a high-power rifle.

Sad scooped up his rifle and ducked back of the trees with Swede, where they scanned the hill beyond the ruins of the old ranch.

"I see him," whispered Swede, twisting at the peep-sight of his rifle. "Five hundred yards."

He lifted his rifle, steadied it for a moment and fired. Almost immediately following the report of the thirty-thirty, a man, riding a pinto horse, broke from the cover of a clump of jack-pines and galloped swiftly over the crest of a ravine, heading back toward the forks.

Sad and Swede sent a hail of bullets in his direction, but were unable to see what effect their shots had, as the target disappeared too quickly.

"That's our friend, Bill Wing," grunted Sad. "He heard the shootin' down here and came down to add his little noise to the celebration."

"I sure hoodled him out of them pines," grinned Swede, craning his neck for another sight of Mr. Wing, but that worthy kept well under cover.

Sad walked out to the prisoners and glanced down at their bonds.

"'F Willyum Wing comes down here he'll likely let yuh loose, but I ain't lookin' f'r him to come back; so we'll let yuh talk things over together. C'm on, Swede."

"Yuh ain't goin' t' leave these jaspers here alone, are yuh?" wailed Swede.

"Do yuh want to stay here and keep 'em comp'ny?"

Swede pursed his lips for a moment.

"Shucks, they ain't got no fight left, but I don't like to have Bill Wing turn 'em loose."

"Ne' mind Bill Wing, Sad. C'm on."

They trotted back to their horses, mounted, and Sad led the way out at a stiff gallop. They watched the rim of the valley closely, but saw nothing of the rider on the pinto horse.

About half way to the forks, Sad swung off the road onto a well worn cattle-trail. Without a question, Swede followed him. The trail led to the top of the hill, where there was a gentle slope downward over rolling hills, brush covered, but fairly smooth going.

"Short cuttin' t' Sundown," called Sad as they topped the ridge. "'Less I'm mistaken we'll save several yards and a few bullets."

"Which is welcome t' man and beast," laughed Swede, and they spurred straight down the slope, as though running a cross-country race.



X

THE funeral of Carey and Corwin brought most of the cattlemen of the Sundown range into town. Both men had been well known and respected. The funeral had an added interest, owing to the way in which the two men had met their deaths. Theories were plentiful. Sheriff Kroll said little, although besieged with questions.

The killing of Hong Kee was also of interest, coming as it did so closely following the other killings. Some laughed at the idea of Alkali Hill being wanted for killing a Chinaman, while others shook their heads and appeared to regard it as a serious matter.

Clell Wheeler was prominent in these arguments, talking little, but defending Hill's actions. He spoke bitterly against the killing of Carey and Corwin, and openly censured Kroll for not doing something to apprehend the murderer.

Kroll made no reply to these attacks; re-

mained silent even when Wheeler spoke sneeringly of Sontag and Harrigan, and remarked that it seemed queer that these two men had suddenly left Sundown.

Wheeler's remarks seemed to take root in the minds of the crowd, and Sontag and Harrigan became the objects of much conversation. Sundown had been peaceful before their coming. The fire at the old Crow's Nest ranch was also something to argue about, although there was no hint that it was of incendiary origin.

The funeral was not to be held until afternoon, but Sundown folks believed in being on time, and as a result the Galena opened to a big business. The Hudson family was housed at the only hotel in town. Everything they owned had been swept away in the fire, and their future appeared very empty indeed.

Gilbert Hudson mingled with the crowd, sullen of face and with his heart bitter against Clell Wheeler, whom he blamed for their condition. He had listened to the different conversations, and finally had spoken openly against Wheeler; not mentioning names, but making his inference very plain.

Jack Rayl found Wheeler on the street and told him that the Hudson boy was shooting off his mouth in the Galena, and that his remarks were directed toward the owner of the TJ ranch.

Wheeler lost no time in going to the Galena, where he found a throng of men listening to Gilbert Hudson. Kroll was among them, listening interestedly. The boy stopped at sight of Wheeler, who came straight to him, his face as black as a thunder-cloud.

"What's all this stuff you been tellin'?" demanded Wheeler hoarsely.

"Better take it easy, Clell," advised Kroll. "You got to consider that the Hudsons has lost everythin' they own, and that kinda makes folks reckless."

"Yeah?" snarled Wheeler. "Since when did you get a license to horn into my business, Kroll?"

Kroll did not say. Wheeler turned back to Gilbert.

"If you was a man, I'd know what to do to you."

"If I was a man," retorted the boy, "I'd have run you out of Sundown long ago."

Wheeler's teeth fairly snapped and he grabbed the boy by the shoulder. For a moment they looked at each other, and Wheeler turned, appealing to the crowd.

"What can a feller do in a case like this?"

Some of the men laughed. Wheeler did not dare to strike the boy, and yet there seemed no other way to force him to quit talking.

"Mebbe yuh better let him alone," suggested Kroll.

"Yeah?" sneered Wheeler, "and let him keep on sayin' that I'm to blame for burnin' their old shack?"

"Who else wanted to get us away from there?" queried Gilbert.

Wheeler's knuckles turned white with the force of his grip on Gilbert's shoulder and he seemed about to lose control of his temper. The boy braced himself against the tensed arm and waited for Wheeler to speak.

More men came in and joined the audience, until the Galena seemed packed with humanity, except for the cleared spot just in front of the bar. Wheeler's grip relaxed a trifle and he turned his head. The room was very quiet as Wheeler spoke softly.

"This kid is sore because I asked them to move. Old man Welton didn't mention the old Crow's Nest ranch in his will and Hudson had nothing to show that Welton ever gave him that ranch.

"Why would the TJ want to burn the Crow's Nest?" He squinted closely at Gilbert and turned back to the crowd.

"You've been lookin' for reasons for the killin' of Carey and Corwin, ain'tcha? They was killed near the old Crow's Nest. About six months ago, Carey and Corwin caught this boy and another boy killing Three-Bar stock."



XI

THE crowd shifted uneasily under the veiled accusation against Gilbert Hudson. For a moment the boy stared at Wheeler, and with a twist of his lithe body, tore away from him and backed against the bar.

"You think I shot them?" Gilbert's voice was barely audible.

Wheeler's thin lips curled slightly. "Well?"

For a moment the boy's face went dead white and he leaned back, and then he sprang straight toward Wheeler, who clinched with him and stumbled against the bar, holding him tight in his arms, while the boy fought with tooth and nail, like a young wild-cat.

Came a man ploughing his way through the crowd, and Bill Wing reached a position near Wheeler. He was breathing heavily, his homely face streaked with dust. The sleeve of his left arm was torn off at the shoulder and used as a bandage around his forearm, which was streaked with blood and dirt.

"Clell!" he croaked. "Clell Wheeler! Leggo that kid!"

Wheeler whirled at the sound of Wing's voice and shoved the boy away from him.

Came the rush of footsteps, a curse of wonderment, and Sad Sontag and Swede Harrigan forced a passage through the crowd, which broke apart at their entrance. Wheeler backed against the bar and stared at them, while the boy drew away, half sobbing.

Sad glanced at Wing and laughed.

"We let yuh beat us here, Willyum Wing; cause we was afraid yuh might not come in if we got here first."

Bill Wing said nothing.

"What's it all about?" asked Wheeler thickly, licking his lips.

The crowd moved away from around Sad and Swede and massed themselves on the other side. Bill Wing did not move, except to flash a quick glance around, as though looking for an exit.

"What's it about?" queried Sad. "Some of it's about you and there's a chapter or two about the things you've done."

"More lies, eh?" Wheeler tried to appear indifferent.

"Y'betcha," nodded Sad. "A lot more. You claim t' own the TJ ranch?"

"Claim to!" Wheeler snorted. "I do own it. And I've got the papers t' prove it."

"A will written by old Hay-wire Welton, eh?"

"You're right. And it'll stand in court, feller."

Wheeler was indignant that there should be any question about the legality of it all.

"I heard it would stand in court," admitted Sad. "I've read it in the records."

"Then whatcha beefin' about?" snapped Wheeler. "Yuh claim to be his nephew, I understand, and you're sore t' think yuh didn't get it."

"Now ain't it a fact?" grinned Sad. "It sure pained me a heap, Wheeler. Why, that doggoned ranch is worth a lot of money, and I was sure sorry t' think that I didn't inherit it.

"Smallpox sure cost me somethin', didn't it? Say, while we're speakin' of smallpox," Sad glanced around at the crowd, and back to Wheeler, "didn't any of you fellers catch it from the old man?"

Wheeler shook his head.

"No, we didn't, but what has that got to do with you?"

"And this here Dr. Gridley went out there t' see the old man. Ain't it queer that he got killed? I been kinda wonderin' whether it was before or after he went to the TJ ranch."

Wheeler jerked forward from the bar and stared at Sad, as though seeking to see what was behind his words. His hand jerked slightly, as though itching to go after a gun. Sad noticed this and grinned.

"Whatcha mean by that?" asked Wheeler thinly. "That doctor's horse ran away with him and——"

"Before or after?" reiterated Sad. "That's the question, Wheeler. Swede, if that Will-yum Wing don't keep his hand where it belongs we'll have t' treat him like we did Alkali and Shorr."

Wheeler's eyes darted to Wing, as though seeking information, but Wing did not look at him.

"What's all this talk about?" demanded Wheeler, trying to force the fear from his voice. "Who are these two stranger punchers that can come here——"

"Yuh might listen," interrupted Sad. "Listen and learn a heap of stuff. F'r instance, why Bill Wing killed a TJ steer and cut out the brand."

Bill Wing jerked up his head and Sad laughed.

"Go ahead and say that there ain't no evidence, Bill. I know who stole that hide. Want me to tell yuh?"

Sad did not know, but his bluff was working fine.

"Carey and Corwin were murdered by mistake," continued Sad. The murderers mistook 'em for me and my pardner. Yessir, Carey and Corwin were shot out of their saddles because they were two men ridin' along that old Crow's Nest road. I'm givin' the murderers credit for feelin' sorry over that mistake."



XII

SAD paused for a moment, as though thinking what to say next. Gilbert Hudson was listening open-mouthed and glorying in the fact that Sad was exploding the Wheeler accusation.

"Keep talkin', stranger," begged one of the crowd.

Wheeler forced a dry laugh and tried to change his position, but thought better of it.

"Hong Kee was killed because he knew somethin'," continued Sad, "and 'f I ain't mistaken, Dr. Gridley was killed f'r the same offense."

"Aw hell!" blurted Wheeler. "This is all guesses. What good are guesses? You come here and stir up a lot of trouble and——"

"Ker-rect!" snapped Sad. "Trouble is right, Wheeler. Hong Kee talked before he died. He gave me a copy of a bill of sale for his restaurant, and that paper was written out

by Gridley and witnessed by him. Whatcha think of that, Wheeler?"

"What have I got to do with any Chink and his bill of sale?" snarled Wheeler. "You talk like an idiot!"

"Thasso?" Sad grinned with his lips, but the rest of his face was far from smiling.

"I'll tell yuh where you came in, Wheeler. Hay-wire Welton willed you the TJ, didn't he?"

"You're right he did!"

"Who witnessed it?"

"Shorr, Hill and Wing. You can't say——"

"Wait a minute!" snapped Sad. "Mebbe the old man was too sick to be responsible f'r what he wrote."

"Like hell he was." Wheeler shook his head and grinned weakly. "Nossir, yuh can't claim that. Didn't he write it all out in proper form, and does it read like he wasn't in his right mind?"

"Clell Wheeler," Sad paused and laughed aloud, "you had a cinch, except for Hong Kee. Alkali didn't kill him soon enough. Mebbe the killin' of him was only what you'd call a coincidence. I ain't blamin' yuh for that kill-

in', Wheeler. Alkali Hill will stand trial f'r that, but I do accuse yuh of killin' Doc Gridley, Pete Carey and Max Corwin—you and your gang.

"Yuh killed old Hay-wire Welton. Yuh lied about the smallpox and killed Gridley to keep him from telling what killed Welton. That smallpox scared folks, just like you knowed it would, and that will was accepted by everyone.

"But you overlooked one fact, Wheeler. Let that gun alone! Nobody got yuh hopped, but keep listenin'. You lied and killed to get the TJ. Now listen and I'll tell yuh how I know."

Sad swayed forward and his eyes bored into the narrowed eyes of the white-faced Wheeler.

"This bill of sale, which belonged to Hong Kee, was written out and witnessed by Gridley. The writing on the document and Gridley's signature were written by the same man.

"It was signed by old Hay-wire Welton, Wheeler; but the name was written by Gridley, and under it was this line, written in small letters:

" 'His mark', and a big X.

"Hay-wire Welton never wrote no will, Wheeler; he couldn't even write his own name!"

As Sad snapped his last word he flung himself forward into Wheeler, blocking his draw, and they crashed backward into the bar. Bill Wing whirled and shot in one swift movement, but Swede Harrigan's pistol exploded a fraction of a second in the lead, and Wing's bullet splintered the floor between Swede's feet. Wing's pistol fell to the floor, and he slouched forward, as though to walk away, swayed for a moment and crumpled in a heap.

Sad and Wheeler rebounded from the bar and almost into the crowd, which pressed in close and stopped the fight. A hand came above the crowd, holding Wheeler's gun and belt, and Kroll's voice sounded above the scuffle of feet: "All right, gents; he's harmless now."

They moved back and gave Kroll room to lead his prisoner outside. Sad, badly disheveled, picked up his hat and went over to Bill Wing, where Swede was looking down at him.

Wing was not dead, but was badly hurt. He looked up at Sad dazedly, and rolled his head sideways to see what had happened to Wheeler.

"The sheriff's got him," explained Sad.

"I got mine," muttered Wing thickly, "but I ain't kickin'. Wheeler was too smart. I—I kicked on burnin' the Crow's Nest house, but we had to get them folks out of there."

"Yuh might come clean, Bill," advised Sad.

"Sure." Wing gritted his teeth against the pain. "I might as well—now. That money is buried under that pile of ashes—the money we stole from the bank, from Hudson. We buried it under the ranch-house and Welton let Hudson live there before we knowed it. We—never—got—it—out. Welton—was—shot. Wheeler—" He tried to swallow, and his last words were faint whispers. "You—was—right—about—Gridley—and—the—Three—Bar—boys. Alkali—was—goin'—to—plant—that—hide—in—Hudson's—barn. We—had—to——"

Sad nodded slowly and turned away. There were only two or three other men left in the Galena and among them was Gilbert Hudson,

white of face and wide-eyed. He had heard Wing's confession. He moved in close to Sad and stared up into his face.

"That money," he gasped, "my old dad's money?"

"Under the ashes," nodded Sad. "I wondered what was in them ashes, kid. Yuh better tell yore folks."



XIII

SAD glanced out of the door. Sundown seemed suddenly quiet, very quiet. Came the scrape of a boot on the creaky sidewalk and Kroll came in. He looked at the body of Bill Wing, at Swede and Sad, and shook his head.

"Where's Clell Wheeler?" asked Sad.

Kroll shook his head again and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before he spoke.

"I dunno, Sontag. I ain't supposed t' know. They took him away from me, the crowd did."

"Well," sighed Sad, "we've still got Alkali and Rocky Shorr. You'll find 'em at the old Crow's Nest."

He and Swede walked outside, and Sad led the way to the hitch-rack, where their horses were tied. Barring the number of horses and vehicles on the street, one would never know that a crowd was in Sundown.

They mounted their horses and rode slowly

up the street. Opposite the hotel they were halted by a voice, and turned to see Kate Hudson coming out into the street, while the rest of the family were coming out of the doorway.

The girl stopped beside them and stared up into Sad's solemn face.

"Is it true?" she asked hoarsely. "Is it?"

"About the money?" asked Sad. "Yes'm, I reckon it's true. They buried it under the old house and you folks moved in before they had a chance to take it away."

Kate Hudson looked back toward the hotel, where her family grouped together, staring at each other.

"I hope you'll build a house there again," said Sad slowly. "Yuh see, yuh own that land, ma'am, and—" Sad shifted in his saddle and rubbed the palm of his hand on his knee—"and there's a short-cut trail between there and the TJ ranch."

The girl's eyes dropped and Swede cleared his throat raspingly.

"Me'n Swede would be right neighborly," added Sad quickly. "Borrow things—eggs 'n butter. See what I mean, don'tcha?"

"Aw, c'm on before yuh get tangled in yore

own loop!" blurted Swede. "This ain't no time t' talk about butter 'n eggs, Sad."

Sad flushed redly about the ears and lifted his reins.

"We'll talk about butter and eggs later," said Kate Hudson, "and the thanks due to you both."

She turned back to the family, and the two cowboys rode on out of Sundown.

From the lower end of the street came a silent crowd of men, stringing out like a drifting herd of sheep, but Clell Wheeler was not with them.

At the hitch-rack Kroll was selecting the men to go with him after the two prisoners at the Crow's Nest ranch. Sad looked back at the town, almost hidden in a dusty haze, and turned to Swede.

"Wheeler was a clever man and he planned out a clever scheme, but he overlooked the ignorant end of it all. Some poet spoke about imitatin' great men, and leavin' our footprints on the sands of time, but uncle Hay-wire wasn't no great man; so he left his prints on Hong Kee's bill-of-sale.

"As soon as this ownership is all fixed up

'cordin' t' law, I'm goin' t' give you half of the TJ ranch, Swede."

"Well, hell!" exploded Swede, staring at Sad. "You're goin' to give me half?"

"We're pardners, Swede," softly.

"Huh!" Swede tried to grin away the lump in his throat. "Well, huh! Sa-a-ay, Sad, would yuh mind havin' a lawyer draw up them papers and havin' all of Sundown witness it? I'm plumb tired of all these killin's."

"We'll make her hoss-high, hawg-tight and bull-strong," laughed Sad, and they spurred their horses into a gallop along the dusty road; for the days of ambush were over and the rambling cowpunchers were heading home.





